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AUTHOR	Sampsell, Martha; Thompson, Earl
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ABSTRACT

This very brief paper is a description of a business course, "Business 350 Managing Diversity," at Elmhurst College in Illinois. The course is taught in an intensive 6-day, 42-hour format. The underlying philosophy of the course is that one becomes more open to the diversity of others by better understanding the diversity within oneself. Reflecting this belief, the course is taught in an experiential format rather than through lectures. Only by engaging their own feelings and by interacting with others around diversity issues can a student become more comfortable with her stereotypes and thus more comfortable with herself and others. Most of the students in the course are adult business majors with substantial prior life and work experience. The course incorporates management activities, role playing and simulation, guest speakers, multicultural sensitivity and culture exercises, and a synthesizing capstone project. It is concluded that the intensive pace of the course, flexibility in the classroom, and physical comfort in the classroom all contributed to the success of the course. (KFT)

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Managing Diversity

A Cooperative Course In Foreign Languages and Business

Martha Sampsell and Earl Thompson
Elmhurst College, Illinois

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Background of Cooperation

Elmhurst College is a four year liberal arts institution in suburban Chicago. The departments of foreign languages and business have a long tradition of collaboration. These efforts have resulted in an international business major which requires a minor in foreign languages with advanced level courses in *French, German and Spanish for Business*, as well as international business internships. My colleague Martha Sampsell, of the Center for Business and Economics at Elmhurst College, and I, from foreign languages, have worked together on these projects, as well as a team-taught foreign study course entitled *Cross-Cultural Experience in Business in Costa Rica*.

In 1996, it was suggested that we create a course of interest to business majors, which would fulfill the College's ***Global Society*** general education requirement. Our efforts resulted in the creation of *Business 350 Managing Diversity*, which has been received with overwhelming enthusiasm from students.

Philosophy of *Managing Diversity*

The underlying philosophy of the course is that one becomes more open to the diversity of others by better understanding the diversity within oneself. Reflecting this belief, the course is taught in an experiential format rather than through lectures. Only by engaging their own feelings and by interacting with others around diversity issues can a student become more comfortable with his/her stereotypes and thus become more comfortable with himself or herself and others. The intense nature of the course contributes to the successful use of the experiential format of the class.

Course Process and Content

Managing Diversity is a team-taught course. We are the instructors. We have collaborated for some 20 years and work well together. Our approaches are similar, we are highly student-oriented. Ironically, however, we are quite autonomous in the way we create a concept for a course. We agree to our respective responsibilities, then each of us develops modular units which are independent of one another and can easily be interchanged.

Most of the students enrolled in *Managing Diversity* are adult business majors who bring to the classroom a wealth of experience. They are highly motivated, which is critical because the course is quite intensive: forty-two contact hours over a six-day period.

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The participants are divided into teams, and are engaged in a wide variety of activities alternating between multicultural sensitivity and culture exercises as well a discussions of relevant case studies in management. The professors alternate throughout the day. Small group activities, videos, slides, guest speakers and a field trip also are a part of the experience. This approach allows for a great deal of flexibility and frequent changes of pace which are necessary to maintain energy and interest for the seven hour sessions.

Management Activities

The management section of the course is designed around the philosophy that there are certain common themes that arise in diversity issues within the workplace. The materials and speakers used in the course are woven around the common threads of self-knowledge, entry into a new environment in which one is minority, conflict issues, leadership issues, and marketing to ethnic groups.

The pedagogical tools used are exercises that relate to diversity within oneself and within business organizations, business case studies and readings from a book by Mary Gentile and outside speakers from Nalco Chemical Co., Leo Burnette Agency, McDonald's Corporation and the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. As mentioned before, the themes are presented as a unit to help students internalize the diverse activities and materials. Throughout the course students augment the materials with accounts of their own relevant personal experiences.

Multicultural Sensitivity and Culture Exercises

Students are sensitized to the issues of multiculturalism in the workplace through a series of exercises designed to make them personally feel uncomfortable and to demonstrate how first impressions may be incorrect and result in misunderstandings. [Show resource book.]

Rather than study several minority groups, we take an in-depth look at Hispanics as representative of the cultural and ethnic diversity in Chicago suburban region around Elmhurst College. We have a number of teaching modules on the geography, history and cultures of the Hispanic countries, and demonstrate how a knowledge of those factors may foster positive business relationships.

The class also takes a field trip to a Mexican restaurant. This may seem a rather simplistic activity. However, it is a very enlightening experience for our students. Virtually all participants have eaten Mexican cooking before but they never have been asked to analyze the menu and the decorations on the walls to determine what they learn from them about the culture and its values. In addition, students are forced by the servers to order in Spanish, which for some of them is indeed an intercultural encounter!

Synthesis

A capstone project on NAFTA ties together the threads of Hispanic culture and managing diversity. The two elements are united through skits that students write during the week and present in groups the last day of class. The setting for the skits is a meeting between Mexican and

US companies cooperating under the NAFTA agreement. Students are asked to read a small textbook on the subject before preparing their skits. The book contains information about NAFTA and a summary of the differences between Hispanic and Anglo cultures. The students enjoy doing the skits and are able to reveal in a non-threatening manner typical blunders made by individuals not sensitive to diversity and its impact on negotiating agreements with other cultures.

Review of Results

From all indications the course has been extremely successful at Elmhurst College. Typically, the enrollment fills during the first day of registration for summer term. Responding to student requests, we are teaching two sections of Managing Diversity for the coming summer term. Part of the success of the course is the fact that it meets a general education requirement and it is in a one week format, However, the majority of the students who take the course are working adults who use a week of their vacation time in order to attend class. From class evaluations and papers it is evident that these students are studying diversity because they understand the importance of the topic in their daily work life. The practical nature of the course appeals to these students.

Another way we are able to judge the results of the course is by reading the student's journals and their final papers. Many of them are brutally honest in their journals, knowing that only the instructors will read them. The two instructors are able to glean from the journals that many students have an increased understanding of others and of themselves. What they are learning applies directly to their individual situations. In papers submitted two weeks after the class is over, the majority of the students focus on a situation at their workplace. The reflective and thoughtful nature of the responses reveal that for many the course was more than a mere learning of facts. The instructors believe that the cohesiveness built into the organization of the course affords students a greater opportunity to internalize the course concepts so that they can use them in their professional lives.

Reflections

Please allow me to share four reflections based on teaching the course for the second time.

First, *the pace*. Prior to teaching this course, I was quite concerned about the grueling schedule of a one-week format. In the past I have been involved in intensive teaching experiences which left me drained, both physically and emotionally. In contrast, the students in *Managing Diversity* provided the energy for the class. Martha and I had only to guide their progress. It has been a very rewarding experience.

Second, *flexibility in the classroom* is one key to success. Martha and I were closely attuned to the moods of our students. We expanded or abandoned activities as necessary. If something didn't work, we moved on. If the class was engaged in a topic, we let them develop it without concern for the syllabus. Each of us had a number of optional exercises available, so that there was no *down time*.

Third, *a comfortable physical environment* is crucial if one is to ask adult students to spend six-

hour days in a classroom. Good lighting, air conditioning, "adult chairs and desks," easy access to audiovisual equipment, maps, and a coffeepot make a significant contribution to success.

Finally, this is a course in Business, not Spanish. We are not preaching to the converted. These are students who are quite pragmatic, very intelligent, but not necessarily Liberal Arts types. Many of them have had no foreign language classes in college. It is a challenge to engage them, to awaken their interest in an area about which many of them know nothing. It is rewarding to hear some of them remark after the experience that they hope to study Spanish in order to better understand the diversity of the society around them.

Concluding statement

As mentioned before, the departments of foreign languages and business at Elmhurst College have a long tradition of collaboration. Our most recent effort, *Managing Diversity*, has been received with overwhelming enthusiasm from students and may serve as a model for other institutions. We would be pleased to answer questions on the topic. Thank you.